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AUTHOR Luce, Eric F.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

In order to compare education perceptions in southern Mississippi with nationwide trends that were identified in the 1992 Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll, the University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Park Poll sought opinions of respondents on the subjects of public attitudes toward public schools, presidential preferences, and state and national level political issues. Interviews were conducted of 470 randomly selected residents of the Mississippi Gulf Coast counties of Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson. As was the case in the nationwide poll, the grading of the public schools dropped when respondents were asked to grade the schools outside of their own region. Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents' views of schools in the nation as a whole reaffirmed the perception that the public schools are in poor condition. Both the Gulf Park Poll and the Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa education polls reflected the sentiment that the public wanted change and improvement in public schools and indicated that the public was willing to see basic structural changes with the aim of improving the public schools. The results of the Gulf Park Poll suggested a public that was in step with national trends. The data indicated that in southern Mississippi, as in the nation, the public wanted improvement in public schools and that little faith existed in the elected leaders to bring about this improvement. (CK)

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THE MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST PUBLIC'S ATTITUDES TOWARD THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Presented at the Mid-South Educational Research Association Annual Meeting
at the New Orleans Radison Hotel/New Orleans, Louisiana
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Presenters:

Eric F. Luce
Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction
The University of Southern Mississippi/Gulf Coast

Dennis Krytsek
Assistant Professor of Political Science
The University of Southern Mississippi/Gulf Coast

Leslie Munn
Teacher
Colmer Junior High
Pascagoula School District

Charles Guy
Principal
Nichols Middle School
Biloxi School District

Robert Cortner
The University of Southern Mississippi/Gulf Coast

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INTRODUCTION

As part of 1992 fall semester course offerings by the Gulf Coast Division of Education and Psychology at the University of Southern Mississippi (REF 601/Educational Research and CIS 700 Issues in Secondary Education), the USM GULF PARK POLL contacted and interviewed 470 randomly selected residents of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Distribution of sample respondents is approximately proportional to relative population levels for Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson Counties. Interviewing was conducted from Tuesday, September 22 through Thursday, October 1, 1992. Respondents' opinions were sought on the subjects of:

1. Public Attitudes Toward the Public Schools
2. Presidential Preferences
3. State and National Level Political Issues

This survey generated such a large amount of data that only the findings related to educational issues, the larger body of findings from this survey, will be reported here. They compare education perceptions in Southern Mississippi with nationwide trends that were identified in the 1992 Gallup/ Phi Delta Kappa Poll.

The results of this survey represent the perceptions and opinions of poll respondents and are not objective measures of subject matter areas. This poll neither endorses nor is sponsored by any individual, political candidate, or interest group. Rather, the Gulf Park Poll is sponsored as an academic endeavor by the University of Southern Mississippi at Gulf Park to provide information as a community service to the general public and to public officials.

The 1st annual GULF PARK education poll reveals a picture of a public which is in step with nationwide trends by many measures. Data from this poll, suggest that in southern Mississippi on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, as in the nation, the public wants improvement in its public schools and that it has little faith in its elected leaders to bring this improvement about. Yet, careful reading of the results from the Gulf Park Poll will give some comfort to those who believe that the public schools are better than they are given credit for being.

GRADING THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Local Schools

When grading the public schools that they know best, the ones in the communities of Hancock, Harrison and Jackson Counties, 44.7% of the respondents in the GULF PARK POLL gave the schools an A or a B, and only 13.4% assigned the local schools failing grades of D or F. This assessment of the quality of public schools on the Mississippi Gulf Coast compares favorably with nationwide trends relating the performance of local public schools in the national survey. In the Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa education poll, 40% of Americans gave the schools in their own communities an A or a B, and only 17% assigned their local schools failing

grades of D or F. Respondents were asked this question: **"Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools in your community themselves were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools in your community--A, B, C, D, or FAIL?"**

Findings

Gulf Park Poll	Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll
A--12.6%	A--9%
B--32.1%	B--31%
C--30.2%	C--33%
D--9.1%	D--12%
Fail--4.3%	F--5%
Don"t Know--11.7%	DK--10%

Schools Nationwide

As was the case in the nationwide poll, grades dropped when respondents were asked to grade the schools outside of their own region. Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents' views of schools in the nation as a whole reaffirm the public's perception that the public schools are in bad shape. Locally, only 23.8% of the respondents gave schools across the nation grades of A or B while the proportion assigning a D or an F rose to 15.9%. In the national poll, 18% gave the public schools grades of A or B, while the proportion assigning grades of D or F rose to 22%.

Respondents were asked--**"How about the public schools in the nation as a whole? What grade would you give the public schools nationally--A, B, C, D, or FAIL?"**

Findings

Gulf Park Poll	Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll
A--2.3%	A--2%
B--21.5%	B--16%
C--41.3%	C--48%
D--11.9%	D--18%
Fail--4%	F--4%
Don"t Know--18.9%	

GRADING THE POLITICIANS

Grades given to the public schools are not as negative, interesting or dramatic as those which the public assigns to its elected leaders for their efforts to improve the schools. Only 26% of the Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents gave President Bush grades of A or B. Nationally only 15% of respondents gave President Bush grades of A or B. In the Gulf Park Poll, 18.5% gave Governor Clinton grades of A or B with 36.6% of respondents indicating that they did not know what grade to provide. Only 9.6% of local respondents did not know what grade to assign to President Bush. A or B grades assigned to the U.S. Congress by Mississippi

Gulf Coast residents fell to 10%, but rose to 25.4% for Governor Fordice. Only 17.2% of the respondents in the GULF PARK POLL gave the Mississippi State Legislature grades of A or B. Nationally, 7% of respondents gave the U.S. Congress grades of A or B. Governors nationwide received grades of A or B from only 19% of respondents while only 14% assigned state legislators grades in this range. Nationwide, public dissatisfiaction was reflected in the respondents' assignment of grades of D or F to Congress (52%), President Bush (46%), the governors (41%), and the state legislators (40%). On the Mississippi Gulf Coast, 49.2% of repondents assigned the U.S. Congress Grades of D or F. President Bush was given a D or F grade by 31.3% of respondents. Governor Clinton's D or F rating was 24.1. The Mississippi State Legislature received D or F grades from 38.7% of respondents while Governor Fordice received D or F grades from 34%. Respondents were asked: **"Government officials at all levels have publicly committed themselves to improvement of the public schools by the year 2000. At this point, what grade would you give the following government officials for improving the public schools--A, B, C, D, or FAIL?"**

Findings

Gulf Park Poll	Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll
President Bush	
A--6.4%	A--3%
B--19.6%	B--12%
C--33.2%	C--30%
D--16.8%	D--25%
Fail--14.5%	Fail--21%
Don"t Know/NA--9.6%	Don"t Know/NA--9%
Gulf Park Poll	Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll
Governor Clinton	
A--3%	Not Available
B--15.5%	
C--20.9%	
D--14.3%	
Fail--9.8%;	
Don"t Know/NA--36.6%	
The U.S. Congress	
A--1.9%	A --1%
B--8.1%	B--6%
C--31.3%	C--30%
D--24.9%	D--30%
Fail--24.3%	Fail/22%
Don"t Know/NA--9.6%	Don"t Know/NA/11%

Governor Fordice

A--4.5%
B--20.9%
C--20.9%
D--15.7%
Fail--18.3%
Don"t Know/NA--19.8%

State Governors

A-- 4%
B--15%
C--30%
D--22%
Fail--19%
Don"t Know/NA--10%

The MS Legislature

A--1.5%
B--15.7%
C--30.4%
D--21.3%
Fail--17.4%
Don"t Know/NA--13.6%

State Legislators

A-- 2%
B--12%
C--33%
D--24%
Fail--16%
Don"t Know/NA--13%

PUBLIC WANTS CHANGE AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Both the GULF PARK POLL and the Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa education polls reflect sentiment that the public wants change and improvement in its public schools. Also, both polls indicate that the public is willing to see basic structural changes with the aim of improving the public schools.

National Testing

•77.2% of Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents favor the use of national standardized tests to measure the academic achievement of students. Nationally, 71% favor the use of national standardized tests. Respondents were asked: **"Would you favor or oppose requiring the public schools in this community to use standardized national tests to measure the academic achievement of students?"**

Findings

Gulf Park Poll
77.2%--Favor
17.2%--Oppose
5.5%--Don"t Know/NA/Not Sure
Mode--Favor; Median--Favor.

Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll
71%--Favor
20%--Oppose
9%--Don't Know

•Many educators oppose the use of a national standardized test, but few disagree in feeling that scores from such a test,if available, should be used to identify areas in which students need extra help and in which teachers need to improve their skills. In this regard, there is common ground between educators and public opinion. 92.8% of Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents favor the use of standardized national tests to identify areas in which students need extra help (85% favor this nationwide) and 83.8% of Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents favor the use of standardized

tests to identify areas in which teachers need to improve their teaching skills (79% favor this nationwide). Respondents were asked **whether standardized national tests should be used**:

"To identify areas in which students need extra help."

Findings

Gulf Park Poll
92.8%--Should
6%--Should Not
1.3%--Don"t Know/NA
Mode--Should; Median--Should.

Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll
85%--Should;
9%--Should Not
6%--Don't Know

and

"To identify areas in which teachers need to improve their teaching skills."

Findings

Gulf Park Poll
83.8%--Should
11.7%--Should Not
4.5%--Don"t Know/NA
Mode--Should; Median--Should

Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll
79%--Should
14%--Should Not
7%--Don't Know

Early Childhood Care and School Achievement

*79.4% of Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents believe that preschool programs would help children from low-income and poverty-level households perform better in school as teenagers. Nationally, 74% favor this idea. Respondents were asked: **"Do you think that preschool programs for children from low-income and poverty-level households would help them perform better in school in their teenage years?"**

Findings

Gulf Park Poll
48.3%--A great deal
31.1%--Quite a lot
12.3%--Not much
4.7%--Not at all
3.6%--Don"t Know/NA
Mode--A great deal; Median--Quite a lot.

Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll
39%--A great deal
35%--Quite a lot
16%--Not much
5%--Not at all
5%--Don"t Know/NA

Longer School Year

*58.1% of Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents support extending the school year to 210 days. Nationwide, 55% support this idea. Respondents were asked: **"In some nations, students attend school as many as 240 days a year as compared to about 180 days in the U.S. How do you**

feel about extending the public school year in this community by 30 days, making the school year about 210 days or 10 month long? Do you favor or oppose this idea?"

Findings

Gulf Park Poll
58.1%--Favor
36.2%--Oppose
5.7%--Don"t Know/NA
Mode--Favor; Median--Favor

Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll
55%--Favor
35%--Oppose
10%--Don"t Know/NA

Vouchers and School Choice

*58.7% of Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents favor adoption of a "voucher system" whereby the government would allot a certain amount of money for each child's education and parents could then send the child to any public, parochial, or private school they choose. One year ago, the Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa poll showed that 50% of respondents supported the "voucher system." Respondents were asked: **"In some nations, the government allots a certain amount of money for each child's education. The parents can then send the child to any public, parochial, or private school they choose. This is called the "voucher system." Would you like to see such an idea adopted in this country?"**

Findings

Gulf Park Poll
58.7%--Favor
32.3%--Oppose
8.9%--Don"t Know/NA/Not sure
Mode--Favor; Median--Favor.

Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll (from 1991)
50%--Favor;
39%--Oppose
11%--Don't Know

*65.7% of Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents favor allowing students and their parents to choose which public schools in this region the students attend, regardless of where they live. One year ago, the Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa poll showed that 62% of respondents nationwide supported this idea. Respondents were asked: **"Do you favor or oppose allowing students and their parents to choose which public schools in this region the students attend, regardless of where they live?"**

Findings

Gulf Park Poll
65.7%--Favor
29.4%--Oppose
4.9%--Don"t Know/NA/Not sure.
Mode--Favor; Median--Favor.

Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll (from 1991)
62%--Favor
33%--Oppose
5%--Don't Know

Dropouts and Driving

*71.7% of Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents favored the passage of a law that would take away driver's licenses from school dropouts under age 18 as a way of keeping students in high school. Last year's Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll showed that 62% of the respondents sampled

nationwide favored this idea. Respondents were asked: **"As a way of keeping students in high school, one state has passed a law that takes away driver's licenses from school dropouts under age 18. Would you favor or oppose such a law in this state?"**

Findings

Gulf Park Poll
71.7%--Favor
20.4%--Oppose
7.9%--Don"t know/NA
Mode--Favor; Median--Favor

Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll (from 1991)
62%--Favor
32%--Oppose
5%--Don"t know/NA
1%--Already has a law

New Uses for School Buildings

*67.2% of Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents favor the use of public school buildings by non-school agencies to provide social and welfare services for students. This year's Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll reveals that 77% of the nationwide sample favor this idea. Respondents were asked: **"Would you favor or oppose using the public school buildings in this community to provide health and social welfare services to students? These services would be administered and coordinated by various government agencies using local school buildings as youth service or support centers."**

Findings

Gulf Park Poll
67.2%--Favor
17.9%--Oppose
14.9%--Don"t Know/NA
Mode--Favor; Median--Favor.

Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll
77%--Favor
16%--Oppose
7%--Don"t Know/NA

Promoting Racial and Ethnic Tolerance

*73.4% of Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents favor increasing the amount of coursework, counseling, and school activities in the local schools to promote understanding and tolerance among students of different races and ethnic backgrounds. Nationwide, favorable response to this idea was 71%. Respondents were asked: **"Do you favor or oppose increasing the amount of coursework, counseling, and school activities in the local schools to promote understanding and tolerance among students of different races and ethnic backgrounds?"**

Findings

Gulf Park Poll
73.4%--Favor
16%--Oppose
10.6%--Don"t know/NA
Mode--Favor; Median--Favor.

Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll
71%--Favor
16%--Oppose
13%--Don"t know/NA

Distribution of Condoms in Schools

* Nationwide, 68% favor the distribution of condoms in public schools (43% of those polled nationwide favored providing condoms for all students who want them and 25% favored provision of condoms only to students who have parental consent). Respondents in the Gulf Park Poll were asked just one question regarding the distribution of condoms by schools--**Do you think that it is appropriate for children to receive condoms from a public school ?** While, only 39.8% of respondents on the Mississippi Gulf Coast favor the distribution of condoms in public schools, this result corresponds closely to nationwide public opinion (43%) favoring provision of condoms for all students who want them. 50.2% of respondents in the GULF Coast POLL were opposed to this idea.

Findings

Gulf Park Poll	Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll
39.8%--Yes	68%%--Yes
50.2%--No	25%--No
10%--DK/NA	7%--DK/NA
Mode/No; Median/No.	

Biggest Problems Facing Schools

Both the Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa education poll and the GULF PARK POLL suggest that the public may be willing to provide additional funding to bring about school improvement. The national poll put "lack of financial support" at the top of the list of problems facing the public schools. Funding and revenues were at the top of the list of problems cited by Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents (30.9% cited funding/revenues as the biggest problem with which the public schools of this community must deal. Discipline was the second most cited item on the Mississippi Gulf Coast list--12.8%).

Respondents were asked: **"What do you think is the biggest problem with which the public schools of this community must deal?"**

Findings

GULF PARK POLL: 30.9%/Funding & Revenues; 12.8% Discipline; 6.6% Lack of Parental Participation; 6.6% Bad Teachers; 6.2% Drugs; 5.5% General Crime; 4% Curriculum; 3.2% Student Apathy; 2.3% Integration; 2.1% Administration; 1.3% Secularism; .6% No Problems; .6% Buildings & Facilities; .4% Transportation; .2% Books; 11.9% Don't Know/No Answer

Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa: 22%/Lack of proper financial support; 22%/Use of drugs; 17%/Lack of Discipline; 9%/Fighting,Violence, Gangs; 9%/Poor curriculum, poor standards; 9%Large schools, overcrowding; 5%/Difficulty in getting good teachers; 5%/Parents; lack of interest; 4%/Moral standards; 4%Integration/busing; 3%/Lack of family structure; 3%/Crime,vandalism; 3%/Lack of good, up-to-date equipment; 3%/Pupil's lack of interest, truancy; 3%/Low teacher pay; 2%/Lack of dedicated teachers; 2%/Lack of attention to/understanding of students; 2%/Lack of needed teachers; 2%/Problems with administration; 2%/Mismanagement of funds/programs; 2%/Drinking, alcoholism; 2%/Teachers lack of interest; 3%/There are no problems; 15%/Miscellaneous; 8%/Don't know.

Willingness To Pay Additional Taxes

66.2% of Mississippi Gulf Coast respondents also indicated a willingness to pay additional taxes to provide preschool programs for children from low-income and poverty-level households (26.6% were not willing). Nationwide, respondents indicated a willingness to pay additional taxes to provide preschool programs for children from low-income and poverty-level households by and 49% to 42% margin. Respondents were asked: **"Would you be willing or unwilling to pay more taxes for funding free preschool programs for children from low-income or poverty-level households?"**

Findings

Gulf Park Poll
66.2%--Willing
26.6%--Not willing
7.2%--Don"t Know/NA
Mode--Willing; Median--Willing.

Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Poll
49%--Willing
42%--Not Willing
9%--Don"t Know/NA

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of public opinion polls is not to judge the rightness or the wrongness of the public's views. The purpose of a public opinion poll is to determine what the public thinks. Those who use the poll determine the significance of the data. Results from the Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa education Poll and from the GULF PARK POLL might be interpreted as showing that the public is reasonably well-informed about its public schools, want to see them improve, and is willing to provide support to bring about improvement. Results from these polls might be interpreted to suggest that American education is not facing a failure of public will but a failure of leadership. However, it must be reiterated that it is incumbent upon those who use the poll data to determine its significance.

Data from the 1st annual GULF PARK education poll suggest that in southern Mississippi on the Mississippi Gulf Coast the public is in step with nationwide trends by many measures, wants improvement in its public schools, but has little faith in its elected leaders to bring this improvement about. Nonetheless, it also seems that the Mississippi Gulf Coast public believes that the public schools are better than they are given credit for being. Perhaps, this belief offers hope that the reality of public schooling on the Mississippi Gulf Coast will be able to measure up to the perceptions, hopes and expectations of the public at large. Perhaps, it will require the emergence of broad-based leadership at the grass roots level to assure that the improvement of public schooling becomes an ongoing reality.

SAMPLE INFORMATION:

Sampling:

Size: N=470

Selection Method: Systematic random selection using telephone directory listings.

Demographics:

Males: 38.8% Females: 61.2%

White respondents: 80.4%

Black Respondents: 13.6% Other/NA: 6.0%

Modal respondant age: 35-49 years

Hancock County residents: 12.8%

Harrison County residents: 44.3%

Jackson County residents: 42.8%

Interview dates: September 22, 1992 through October 1, 1992.

Sampling error: +/- 4.5%